

**Statement of Eric Tolbert
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Chairman Davis and Members of the Committee, I am Eric Tolbert, Director of the Response Division of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which is part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). On behalf of Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge and Under Secretary for Emergency Preparedness and Response Michael Brown, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on the operations of the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA in response to Hurricane Isabel.

Recovery from the disaster is ongoing and I can assure you that President Bush is committed to providing assistance to help all of the affected States and local jurisdictions from North Carolina to Pennsylvania get back on their feet. DHS and FEMA will be there as long as needed.

Hurricane Isabel will not be forgotten anytime soon because of the widespread hardships so many people had to endure, including the loss of loved ones, homes, possessions, power, and water. In many respects, I believe Isabel was a wakeup call for a lot of people who had forgotten or didn't realize how powerful a hurricane and tropical storm could really be.

Having been involved in emergency response and management for all of my professional life, I am always deeply impressed by the countless heroic and unselfish efforts of our emergency responders from the police, fire, and emergency medical communities. Without hesitation, they placed themselves in harm's way to help protect others. I am grateful to them for their ultimate sacrifice and bravery. I am also proud of our own FEMA disaster response employees for their dedication in helping others in need. Many of them were also disaster victims themselves and had the added burden of worrying about their own families and loved ones and property as they carried out the response to Isabel. The level of cooperation and professionalism exhibited by all of the local, State, and Federal personnel, emergency responders, volunteers, and private sector responders has been outstanding. The American people can be proud of the work they are doing to help the region recover. And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the hard work and long hours put in by the utility crews to restore power.

Our response to Hurricane Isabel at FEMA and DHS demonstrates our steady improvement in coordinating and leading Federal, State and local response efforts to protect life and property in times of disaster. The seamless collaboration of the response

elements in DHS with those in other Federal departments and agencies made possible a rapid pre-positioning of disaster assets and capabilities throughout the eastern United States. This helped to ensure an effective and rapid response in assisting States and communities protect the lives and property of their citizens.

Federal Response to Disasters

Since becoming part of the Emergency Preparedness and Response Directorate (EP&R) of DHS, FEMA has continued its traditional role of preparing for, mitigating against, responding to, and recovering from disasters caused by all hazards. Since March 1st, FEMA has provided disaster relief in over 60 Presidentially-declared disasters and emergencies from Alaska to New York to American Samoa. These disasters include such events as the President's Day snowstorm and the devastating tornadoes that struck the Midwest and South in May. Most recently, of course, we have been dealing with Hurricane Isabel.

Our success in responding to disasters has always depended on our ability to organize and lead a community of local, State, and Federal agencies and volunteer organizations in providing relief. Experience has taught us over the years who to bring to the table and what questions to ask, and this experience has allowed us to improve over time in managing a wide range of emergencies. Since its inception in 1992, the Federal Response Plan (FRP) has provided the organizational framework and process that has enabled the Federal government to respond as a cohesive team to a wide range of natural and manmade disasters and catastrophes. This team is made up of 26 Federal departments and agencies, as well as the American Red Cross. It is organized based on the authorities and expertise of the members, and the needs of our counterparts at the State and local level.

The formation of DHS has provided us with the opportunity to further integrate and enhance the capacity of Federal response efforts. On February 28, 2003, the President directed the Secretary to establish a single, comprehensive national incident management system with the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and to integrate separate Federal response plans into a single all-discipline, all-hazards National Response Plan (NRP). FEMA has been actively participating in these efforts. We are also a co-facilitator and have regional participation on the State, tribal and local NIMS/NRP workgroup, which is an intergovernmental advisory group assembled to provide State and local input, guidance and expertise to the NRP/NIMS revision efforts.

The evidence of strong State and local preparations and response to Hurricane Isabel can also be attributed to our long-standing efforts in support of building State and local response capabilities. Ongoing FEMA preparedness initiatives include approximately \$165 million in FY 2003 in Emergency Management Performance Grants (EMPG) for State and local government all hazards preparedness and emergency management activities. The EMPG has been critical in improving the effectiveness of State and local emergency management and first responder organizations through

planning, training, exercises, and support of operational facilities in sustaining response operations. The EMPG has also been key in supporting mitigation program activities designed to reduce the vulnerability of communities to all hazards.

In addition, training has played a very important role in preparing our firefighters, law enforcement, emergency managers, healthcare workers, public works, and state and local officials. Both the Emergency Management Institute (EMI) and the National Fire Academy (NFA) offer a wide variety of training programs to promote the professional development of command level firefighters, emergency managers, emergency responders and technical staff, with the very skills used in preparing for and responding to Hurricane Isabel. In FY 2003, EMI provided critical emergency management training for over 8,000 students and over 185,000 individuals completed independent study courses. The NFA provided either residential or training through outreach, regional or direct deliveries, and distance learning efforts to over 95,000 students. Both EMI and NFA expect to increase course offerings and number of students trained for FY04.

All of our efforts to sustain and enhance Federal, State, and local preparedness and response capabilities paid off in our response to Hurricane Isabel.

Hurricane Isabel Response

Tropical Storm Isabel developed September 6, 2003, some 600 miles west of the Southern Cape Verde Islands. The next day the storm was upgraded to a hurricane and on September 11, 2003, Isabel was upgraded to the first Category 5 Hurricane in the Atlantic basin since Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

Our efforts to place greater emphasis on being more proactive and forward-looking in our preparedness and response operations, with added focus on situational awareness, helped us significantly in preparations for the landfall of Hurricane Isabel. We recognized early on that Isabel would evolve into a significant multi-regional response so we issued an Operations Order on September 15, 2003, four days before landfall, to step up coordination and action planning activities in advance of the predicted landfall. My intent was to make FEMA totally prepared and in the best possible position to rapidly and effectively execute disaster response operations, as directed by the President, in support of State and local jurisdictions.

Operations at our National Emergency Operations Center (NEOC) were augmented with activation of the Emergency Support Team (EST) on September 15, 2003, to help coordinate preparation for and response to the disaster. At that time, advance elements of the Emergency Response Team-National (ERT N) were dispatched to FEMA Regions III and IV, and regular schedule of video-teleconferences were initiated with all of the East Coast States from Florida to New England that we anticipated could potentially be impacted by the hurricane. The purpose of the video-teleconferences was to provide storm information and predictions and to facilitate coordination, action planning, and preparations among the States and the District of

Columbia, DHS and FEMA Headquarters elements, the White House, the Hurricane Liaison Team at the National Hurricane Center, our Regional Operations Centers (ROC) in FEMA Regions I, II, III, and IV, the FEMA Mobilization Centers, and the Emergency Support Function (ESF) departments and agencies.

The Hurricane Liaison Team, which operated around the clock, was invaluable in coordinating real time meteorological updates and predictions from the National Hurricane Center, the Hydrometeorological Prediction Center, the Southeast River Forecast Center, the Mid-Atlantic Forecast Center, and other National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration components. Beginning September 15th and continuing through the post disaster period, video-teleconferences were conducted at least twice daily to give the affected States and the District of Columbia an open line of communications and the opportunity to raise questions, express concerns, coordinate information, and most importantly, request assistance and resources to respond to the disaster. Advanced elements of our Emergency Response Teams and State Liaisons were dispatched before the storm to the affected States and the District of Columbia to coordinate disaster response activities. Our proactive stance allowed us to largely complete our preparedness activities for the storm, including pre-positioning assets, by Wednesday, September 17th.

Action planning was initiated prior to and continued after landfall of the hurricane. Our priorities focused on developing contingency plans for life support and mass care including sheltering, feeding, and medical care, especially for isolated communities; providing ice, water, generators, and electrical power for critical facilities; arranging mobile feeding sites; establishing Disaster Field Offices and Disaster Recovery Centers; implementing individual and public assistance activities; and removing potential sunken vessels and assessing coastal erosion.

In preparation for the disaster, FEMA Logistics continuously monitored the availability of supplies to ensure that levels on hand would be adequate to meet immediate response requirements. Before Isabel made landfall, FEMA pre-positioned hundreds of tons of emergency disaster supplies in mobilization centers in the disaster areas. Five “Advanced Initial Response Resources Deployment (AID) Packages” were available and three were pre-positioned. Each AID package consisted of 10 trailers containing cots, blankets, emergency meals, portable toilets, plastic sheeting, bottled water and generators. Our Mobile Emergency Response Support (MERS) capabilities played a critical role in supporting the disaster response mission: MERS assets from Thomasville, Georgia were deployed to support activities in North Carolina; and the Denver, Colorado and Denton, Texas MERS supported activities in Virginia.

We established mobilization centers at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, and Edison, New Jersey, and staging areas at Ft. A.P. Hill, Virginia, and Columbus, Ohio. Ft. A.P. Hill was subsequently converted to a mobilization center and when operations were discontinued there a mobilization center was established at Ft. Eustis, Virginia to continue operations. Many of the other assets which we pre-positioned came from throughout the eastern United States and were also critical to launching an effective

response including: Rapid Needs Assessment Teams; the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) Disaster Medical Assistance Teams; Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces; Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Hazardous Materials Teams; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Forest Service, General Services Administration (GSA), Department of Energy, and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Teams; and other assets.

In addition to all of the pre-positioned assets mentioned above, we provided a FEMA liaison, an EPA Hazardous Materials Team, five HHS Teams, a Regional Emergency Transportation Coordinator Team, five U.S. Forest Service Teams, a Department of Energy Team, and multiple GSA assets to support Washington, D.C. Two EPA Hazardous Materials Teams were pre-positioned at the Maryland State EOC in Reisterstown, Maryland, along with FEMA liaisons and elements of FEMA's Emergency Response Team and a Rapid Needs Assessment Team. Three EPA Hazardous Materials Teams, two HHS Teams, a U.S. Forest Service Team, a Department of Energy Team, and seven U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Teams were dispatched to Richmond, Virginia, to support the Commonwealth of Virginia.

DHS, through FEMA, the Coast Guard, and other emergency response elements, coordinated a massive Federal response to millions of citizens throughout the mid-Atlantic region impacted by Hurricane Isabel. The greatest need in this disaster was for power, ice, and water. The response demonstrates our successful integration of numerous assets, once used for a specific, more narrowly defined mission, for an all-hazards purpose. The Hurricane Isabel response illustrates that the asset integration and coordination has improved the Department's ability to protect the American people in time of crisis. For example:

- The U.S. Coast Guard supported FEMA and State and local agencies with aircraft, boats, and personnel flying missions in support of recovery efforts. Vessels and aircraft assessed aids to navigation and damage to ports and waterways, and were used to detect and respond to pollution incidents.
- The DHS Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (BICE) provided imaging support through its surveillance planes that enabled us to survey the extent of damage, and better plan for and target the restoration in heavily damaged areas. For example, the NC Highway 12 breach was identified. The BICE Office of Air and Marine Interdiction provided airplanes for aerial remote sensing and infrared imaging damage assessment missions in the Outer Banks area immediately following the hurricane. This allowed a quick assessment of isolated populations and facilitated our life saving and safety missions and our assessment of damages/breaches to the barrier islands, property, and infrastructure. Having access to the BICE and Coast Guard capabilities gave us for the first time ever management planning and support for air operations.
- Four Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Task Forces were deployed as "Type III" Light Task Forces with 28 personnel each, designed for rapid deployment to a

hurricane-impacted area. Task Forces from Ohio and Indiana were pre-positioned in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and Task Forces from Tennessee and Missouri were pre-positioned at Ft. A.P. Hill in Virginia. One of three USAR Incident Support Teams deployed to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and USAR Rapid Needs Assessment liaisons were dispatched to the North Carolina State Emergency Operations Center in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the Virginia State Emergency Operations Center in Richmond, Virginia.

- As part of the NEOC operations, DHS officials continuously monitored 15 sector-specific Information Sharing and Analysis Centers, including the most vulnerable critical infrastructures such as electricity, telecommunications, water, and transportation and supported private sector efforts to resume critical power and water services in all the impacted areas.
- The U. S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service supplied food to disaster relief organizations such as the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army.
- In coordination with FEMA, the HHS emergency response teams deployed to damaged areas to assist State and local officials evaluate the status and accessibility of hospitals, check water and sanitation quality, and monitor public health needs. FEMA's National Disaster Medical System teams provided critical medical assistance to isolated populations on the Outer Banks.

When Hurricane Isabel made landfall on North Carolina's Outer Banks on the morning of September 18, 2003, it was a very powerful Category 2 hurricane. The storm packed winds close to 100 mph accompanied by heavy rain and storm surges of up to 11 feet above normal tidal levels. The winds, rain, and storm surge from Isabel created a huge area of destruction that includes extensive coastal flooding and lowland flooding, more than a million customers without power, damaged homes and businesses and tens of thousands of displaced residents. Forty deaths have been attributed to the Hurricane.

As a result of Hurricane Isabel, President Bush has issued seven major disaster declarations for areas along the mid-Atlantic Coast, from North Carolina to Pennsylvania. In the National Capital Region, the President signed disaster declarations for Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia in a matter of hours after they had been requested by the Governors and the Mayor.

These declarations not only ensured that Federal resources at the disposal of the Federal government could be utilized to support State and local efforts to respond to Hurricane Isabel, but also authorized a wide array of recovery programs to help States, communities, and individuals recover. While FEMA's Recovery programs cannot make a disaster victim whole, nor duplicate insurance proceeds, it can assist individuals and families with funds to safely house them and cover necessary expenses and serious needs such as medical, dental, or funeral costs. Combined assistance under the program cannot exceed \$25,000. In addition to being able to provide businesses with low-interest loans, the Small Business Administration can also provide low-interest home loans to

homeowners to help return a damaged dwelling to its pre-disaster condition. In order to make the application process for Federal assistance for disaster victims as simple as possible, the FEMA toll free number [1-800-621-FEMA (3362)] can be used to initially access SBA loans as well as provide a host of referral information for other kinds of needs in addition to our own programs.

In the first ten days after Hurricane Isabel hit the Atlantic Coast, we received a total of 49,702 applications in the National Capital Region: 40,068 in Virginia; 8,965 in Maryland; and 669 in the District of Columbia. Within two weeks from the date of the first disaster declaration for Hurricane Isabel, a total of over \$17.4 million in disaster assistance was already out on the street: \$8.6 million in Virginia; \$8.6 million in Maryland; and \$200,000 in the District of Columbia. The average turnaround time from application to delivery of assistance is 7-10 days, although \$2.5 million dollars was on the street in less than a week from the first disaster declaration. We were able to accomplish through the use of over 1,400 agents to take and process applications and over 500 inspectors in the field to inspect damaged dwellings. Also multiple fixed and mobile Disaster Recovery Centers have been established with the States and the District of Columbia for disaster victims to visit in person, ask questions, and check on the status of their application. While a lot has been accomplished in a short period of time, there is still much to be done.

The Crisis Counseling and Training Program is available to provide supplemental short-term crisis counseling services to those States that may be overwhelmed from helping those affected by the disaster. With technical assistance provided by the Center for Mental Health Services, within HHS, applications for crisis counseling are evaluated and, if approved, can provide for services to alleviate mental health problems caused or aggravated by the disaster.

One of the questions that disaster victims will be asked when applying for assistance through our toll free number is whether or not they are out of work due to the disaster. Depending on the information collected, the State will determine whether or not they would like to request activation of the Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA) Program. The DUA Program provides unemployment benefits and re-employment services to individuals, including self-employed individuals, who were living or working in the affected areas at the time of the disaster, who are unemployed as a result of the disaster, and who are not covered by the State's existing Unemployment Insurance Program. Maryland has received an initial funding amount of \$115,000 and the District of Columbia has received an initial payment of \$30,360. The State of Virginia has expressed an interest in activating the DUA Program.

FEMA's Public Assistance program can provide cost-shared reimbursement for the repair or replacement of public damaged facilities, such as roads, bridges, wastewater treatment plants, public utilities, or, for example a county courthouse. It also provides for reimbursement for eligible debris removal and emergency protective measure costs that can be sizable in such events as Hurricane Isabel. In fact, in less than two weeks we obligated over \$4 million in Virginia alone to remove debris and to help

defray the increased costs for protecting public safety during the first hours of the storm. FEMA continues to work with the States and the District of Columbia to assess damages and determine eligibility for repair or replacement projects.

During the rebuilding process, FEMA can consider some mitigation measures to be incorporated that would lessen the impact of future disasters, thereby protecting life and property from future disasters. It is important to note that by law, FEMA cannot duplicate insurance coverage that is available to the property owner. But the overall help FEMA can provide under Stafford Act authorities can play a significant role in the long-term recovery of a State and its communities.

FEMA is also coordinating a long term recovery working group of Federal agencies that can assist States and communities to recover from disasters. The working group will support State efforts to: 1) assess potential long term impacts from the hurricane; 2) consider opportunities to reduce future disaster damages and meet other community planning goals as they plan for restoration of damaged infrastructure, services, housing, and commercial areas; and 3) coordinate among agencies and programs to maximize resources to support recovery.

FEMA has already met with representatives from the Virginia Departments of Emergency Management and Housing and Community Development to discuss an approach and objectives for long term recovery planning in Virginia. The Governor of Virginia plans to establish a State task force on long term recovery. FEMA is contacting other States affected by Isabel to assess need and interest in Federal support for coordinating long term recovery. In addition, FEMA is utilizing this effort as an opportunity to develop a more systematic long term recovery planning and coordination process for future disaster events, which is a concept we plan to incorporate into the NRP.

As in all disasters, we will learn valuable lessons from the Hurricane Isabel response. The key to our continued improvement will be to take these lessons and incorporate them into our preparedness, planning, doctrine, and procedures so that we do even better next time. We will be working with the Congress, other Federal partners, State and local leaders, and other affected stakeholders to continue to enhance our ability to respond effectively to all types of disasters.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today, and would be glad to answer any questions that you have.